

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter Nine: Heroes

❖ Haley Hotel, Los Angeles
❖ 24 December 1987

The Christmas party in the penthouse ballroom of the Haley Hotel was the hottest ticket in town. As this was also the hotel's official opening, the owners had pulled out all the stops in inviting the elite of Los Angeles society, as well as select media representatives to ensure that the evening got the coverage it deserved. A band played schmaltzy Christmas numbers and champagne flowed like water.

Bruce Kirby could think of a million places he would rather be. He pulled at the uncomfortable collar of the tux his father had insisted he wear, and tried to look invisible as a young brunette woman strode purposefully over to them.

'Mayor Kirby!'

'Ah, yes Ms Lane, delightful to see you here. How are things at the Globe?' Stan Kirby turned his multi-kilowatt, election-winning smile on the Los Angeles Globe's ace reporter, Penelope Lane, but she was having none of it.

'I have some questions about your son's court appearance. He seems to have been let off remarkably lightly for an accessory to—'

Bruce edged away. The last couple of weeks had been the worst of his life, beginning with his so-called 'friend' involving him in a robbery, then an encounter with a supernatural vigilante which had ended with his friend's death. He had come clean to the law, and it did appear he had been let off remarkably lightly. He suspected his father's position was the cause of that. So, evidently, did Penelope Lane.

Moving to a discrete distance, he saw his father snag two champagne flutes from a passing waiter and hand one to the persistent reporter. However that particular confrontation ended, Bruce knew he would feel the edge of his father's tongue later. Again.

A movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he turned his head to see the most extraordinary girl he had ever laid eyes on. Not because of her looks—oh, sure, she was pretty, but the room was full of movie starlets—but because of how she *looked*. The girl was white as a ghost. Literally. Hair, skin, clothing. All pale white. And kind of ... translucent.

Bruce seemed to be the only person in the room who had noticed this. The girl moved through the crowd, not interacting with anybody. No, wait. She was moving *through* the crowd. Literally. Like a ghost.

Bruce rubbed his eyes. When he looked again, she was nowhere to be seen.

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Astra moved insubstantially through the ballroom. Nobody could see her astral body unless she wanted them to—though there was an awkward moment with the cute boy who she had focussed perhaps a bit too much attention on—and nobody could touch her whether she wanted them to or not.

She was here for one purpose only, and that was to find a clear area of floor where a mystical portal could be opened.

Selecting a spot near the elevators, she knelt down and with her fingertips drew the mystical symbol she had been taught. A second later, a burst of cold, red flame sprang up from the spot. And through the flame stepped the man she hated most in the world.

When the flame appeared there were a few shrieks, of surprise rather than fear, from nearby revellers who thought they were witnessing some pyrotechnical entertainment. When the man appeared, his vivid red costume and cloak made some think it was a visit from Father Christmas. His words soon put paid to that idea.

‘Good evening ladies and gentlemen,’ he bellowed in a commanding voice with a trace of a German accent. ‘I go by the name Hellfire, perhaps you have heard of me? No? No matter, I am sure you will know my associates.’

More figures were stepping through the fiery portal, and they were indeed known to most of the assembled crowd. Neutron, the nine-foot super-powered giant, and his partner the Dragon, both members of the international terrorist group known as the Anarchists. Following them came a team of six men in combat fatigues and armed with automatic weapons.

‘You will all please keep away from the exits and obey our commands, or there will be consequences. Severe consequences.’

Chaos broke loose as people pushed and shoved to get away from the villains.

Penelope Lane kept her head among the chaos. She grabbed her colleague, ace photographer Jonny Ibsen, who was already snapping pictures of the villains. She pointed at the nearest CCTV camera.

‘Jonny, there’s a security office three floors down. Get down to it before they seal the exits. I’ll run interference for you.’

‘Ok, Ms. Lane. But why?’

‘Because this is the story of the year, and you’re going to transmit the footage from this CCTV directly to the Globe. Can you do that?’

‘You bet, Ms. Lane!’

While Jonny melted into the panicking crowd, Penelope marched straight up to the man who had announced himself as Hellfire.

‘Penelope Lane, L.A. Globe. Care to make a statement to the press, or are you going to be too busy killing these people?’

Hellfire’s expression was hidden by a full-face mask, but she fancied that she had amused him.

‘Certainly, Ms. Lane. You can tell the world that we are more than willing to start killing the rich and famous of Los Angeles unless large sums are transferred into certain off-shore bank accounts—well, you won’t need to tell them, the news is being delivered to the relevant people even as we speak. We plan most carefully, you see.’

‘That’s enough, Hellfire,’ snapped Neutron. ‘Keep your ego in check and carry out the plan. Countermeasures, as discussed.’

‘I know how to do my job! See that your men keep the hostages in the centre of the room and give me space to work. Astra!’

At the mention of her name, Astra allowed Hellfire and the other super-villains to see her. ‘Here.’

‘Good. You have done well, girl. See that you continue to do so. Or ...’

He let the threat hang. Penelope Lane was mystified. Who and where was this ‘Astra’? And what were ‘countermeasures’? There was more going on than she could see, but she was determined to get to the bottom of it. Then a hand touched her elbow and drew her back into the crowd. She recognised Bruce Kirby.

‘Your man got away,’ he whispered. ‘Is he going for help?’

‘Help? He’s going for a *story!*’ she responded. Bruce suppressed a groan. Three super-villains, six gunmen ... they needed a miracle right now.

- ❖ The Strikeforce Space Station (miracles department)
- ❖ Geostationary Earth Orbit

‘Information. I have information on current whereabouts of Neutron and the Dragon,’ announced the Computer, interrupting a team meeting at which the talk had gone round and round in circles about how they were to find the two men in question. Electron, Nightflyer, Scorpio and Avatar stopped arguing and paid attention.

‘I love it when a plan comes together,’ smiled Nightflyer.

‘This is a coincidence, not a plan,’ said Scorpio. ‘Computer, what do you have?’

The Computer showed grainy TV footage on the main screen. ‘Footage originated from interior cameras on the top floor of the Los Angeles Haley Hotel.’

The picture quality wasn’t great (Jonny Ibsen would later protest to Ms. Lane that he was a photojournalist, not a miracle worker) but the nine-foot-tall figure of Neutron was unmistakable.

‘Neutron, that must be Dragon, somebody else in a cloak ... are those gunmen? Computer, can you clear the image up?’ said Electron.

‘Negative. I am a computer not a miracle worker.’

Electron opened his mouth for a retort, then closed it again, frowning. Sometimes the Computer said the most un-computerlike things.

Scorpio was saying, ‘Clear enough to see they have hostages. Too many hostages. We are going to have to move fast and carefully.’ His tactical mind was already looking at attack scenarios. ‘Teleport to the roof ... Electron can teleport us—’

‘Maybe two of you,’ said Electron. ‘Really only one, safely.’

‘We need Black Swan. Computer, try her communicator again.’

‘Working. No response.’

‘Well that’s annoying,’ said Nightflyer.

‘She is starting to tick me off,’ said Scorpio. ‘How many team meetings has she missed now?’

‘Can we get back to the plan?’ asked Electron. ‘We don’t know why the Anarchists are there, but the longer we delay the worse it’s going to be for the hostages. Computer, set the beam on the roof now.’

‘Confirmed.’

It took roughly ten minutes to complete the sensor readings required to set a teleport beam, but the Computer could carry out that process while they planned. Another limitation of their teleport was that they could only teleport to an outside location, which limited their options to surprise the Anarchists. But their own powers gave them options.

‘I’ll leave my body on the roof and go down in my astral form,’ announced Avatar.

‘In what?’ asked Scorpio, mystified. So Avatar explained ...

- ❖ Rooftop, Haley Hotel
- ❖ Ten minutes later

Avatar sat down carefully in a sheltered spot. He muttered some words in the strange language he used for magic.

‘Have you done it?’ asked Electron.

Avatar willed his astral body to become visible to his friends. They perceived him as a ghostly, translucent figure standing next to his motionless body.

‘Boo!’

‘Very funny,’ said Scorpio, in a tone that implied it wasn’t.

‘Now I’ll go and look through the windows and report back,’ said the demon, and silently floated over the edge of the roof. A few seconds later he was back.

‘They’ve got all the hostages grouped in the centre of the room, all sitting down. Six men with guns, Dragon, Neutron, a cloaked man I don’t know, and the ghost girl.’

‘Ghost girl? From the San Francisco fight?’ asked Scorpio.

‘Yes. The one you couldn’t see because she was in an astral form. Now do you believe me?’

‘Well, to be fair, I didn’t know about astral projection when you told me about her. It did sound a bit far-fetched.’

‘Well, she’s there, and that will be a problem. She knows some powerful spells and can counter any of my magic. But last time, I was in physical form so I couldn’t touch her. In astral form, I’ll be physical to her.’

‘Your spells will get through to her?’

‘Probably not, but I’ll have my demonic strength and speed and I think she’s just human. I’ll flatten her. But I can’t touch the physical opponents when I’m like this. Spells only against those. Oh, and, Computer, beam up my body.’

A shimmer of light and the demon’s physical body vanished. His astral body remained on the roof.

‘If they get up here and attack my body, I’m dead,’ Avatar said by way of explanation.

‘Is there a limit to how far away your body can be?’ asked Electron curiously.

‘Apparently not!’

Scorpio chewed it over. It was an interesting tactical problem. To take down the girl, Avatar was limiting his usefulness against the rest of the villains. But nobody else could take down the girl, it seemed, while she could still use her spells against Strikeforce—or hostages.

‘Ok, I don’t think we’ve got a lot of options. Avatar takes on ghost girl. Electron teleports us through the roof well clear of the hostages. Nightflyer, you’re the fastest, you’ll have to take down all the gunmen before any of them gets a shot off.’

‘Six of them? Easy.’

‘Electron, you and me on Dragon and Neutron. Can you take Neutron, or at least hold him until Avatar can back you up with magic?’

‘I’ll be drained after teleporting two passengers ... yeah, I guess I’ll have to. Damn Black Swan.’

‘Ok, on my mark. Ready Avatar? Go.’

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Ballroom, Haley Hotel❖ Half a second later |
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There was a crackle of static as Electron teleported through the roof with his two teammates. He hadn’t exaggerated the strain. His knees buckled and spots danced in front of his eyes, and only by a major effort of willpower did he hold onto consciousness.

Scorpio and Nightflyer didn’t pause to check whether he was all right. Nightflyer didn’t even pause to consciously take in the scene in the room; he was a blur of motion towards the nearest gunman. A precise elbow strike in passing felled the man and without breaking stride Nightflyer was across the room and punching another to the ground.

Two more gunmen were reacting now, raising automatic weapons to track Nightflyer’s motion. Nightflyer was unconcerned for his own safety—he could dodge bullets all day—but he couldn’t allow a single shot in a room full of civilians. Throwing caution to the wind, he cartwheeled on a precise trajectory that would land a spinning kick on each gunman. In mid-manoeuve, his intuition sent danger signals to his muscles. Only then did he realise that the dazed Electron had been unable to stall Neutron, and the giant had flung himself to intercept Nightflyer. The sane course of action would be to twist aside and avoid the villain’s grasp. But then he wouldn’t hit the gunmen, who were now a fraction of a second from opening fire ...

All this went through Nightflyer’s mind in less time than it takes to blink. Overriding his instincts, he continued his manoeuvre. The gunmen went down.

And Neutron grabbed Nightflyer's arm in a grip that could bend steel.

The giant villain smashed Nightflyer into the floor. Swung him backhand into a concrete pillar that actually cracked with the impact. And then simply hefted his stunned form into the air and punched him towards the windows that ran the full length of the room. The toughened glass shattered with a deafening sound, and Nightflyer kept going.

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Across the room, according to plan, Scorpio was locked into a hand-to-hand battle with the Dragon. The combatants were evenly matched, both masters in their chosen martial arts and both well protected—Scorpio by his spider-silk armour, and the Dragon by a force-field that surrounded his body.

Even while fighting, Scorpio's tactical mind was aware of the other battles around him and had seen Neutron eject Nightflyer from the building. Scorpio had no idea if Nightflyer was still alive, and even if he was he doubted that he could survive a thirty-storey fall. But he couldn't help his friend, and he couldn't allow such thoughts to distract him from his real job: protecting innocent lives.

There were two gunmen left, and both were about to shoot indiscriminately. Scorpio couldn't reach either of them. With a flash of inspiration, he snatched a round, silver tray from an adjacent table and flung it towards one of the men. Like a discus it spun through the air, and smashed the gunman to the floor. But the final man was already firing ...

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Bruce Kirby saw the muzzle of the sub-machinegun swing towards the group of hostages he was with. Saw Scorpio's trick with the tray. Wondered if he could do something similar. Looked down helplessly at the bare table he stood behind.

It was a heavy, hardwood table. Massive, in fact. And Bruce had a secret that very few people knew: through some accident of fate, he had been born with super-human strength.

Bruce gripped the edge of the table, and heaved.

'Get down!' he shouted, as he tipped it onto his side. Bullets thudded into it, as the hostages crouched in the temporary cover he had provided. Bruce glanced to either side. He didn't want to use his strength openly like this, but people were going to die.

Picking up the table with a roar, he charged at the gunman, smashing his makeshift battering ram into him and decisively ending the threat. Breathing hard, he dropped the table and looked around. Only to see Neutron looming over him.

'Oh, sh—'

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And what of Avatar through all this? Things hadn't gone according to plan for the demon. In his astral form he had slipped silently and invisibly through the window, entering the room at the same moment Electron teleported the others in. Accelerating to his full super-human speed, he flew straight at Astra—the 'ghost girl', obviously—with the intention of knocking her out before she could cast a spell at him.

It was a fine plan. Which would have worked if he had not ran full force into an invisible but immovably solid barrier. The impact was soundless, but it was nevertheless very real. He rebounded back in pain, his head spinning. Through blurred vision, he saw what he had missed on his previous brief scouting mission: a circle of chalk drawn on the floor.

Though Avatar had no formal training in magic—his spells were purely instinctive abilities for him—he still understood what a circle of protection was. Despite his vast power, there was no Earthly

way he could cross that simple chalk circle in his astral body. And the villains had of course arranged it that all the action was taking place inside.

The ghost girl appeared in front of him. He braced himself for a spell, not certain if he was powerful enough to counter it.

But no spell came. Instead, she mouthed, 'Sorry.' He didn't understand. She looked sincere ... That was when the bolt of magical fire from Hellfire struck him.

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It takes six seconds to fall thirty stories. Nightflyer was unconscious as he exited the window. It took one and a half seconds for his regenerative capabilities to bring him to consciousness. It took another half second for him to fumble for the grappling line in his belt pouch. He could feel several broken bones hampering his movements. They would take longer to heal, but he could ignore them for now. Another half second and he was hurling the tiny collapsible grapple towards the building. He could barely see where he aimed but his intuition guided his arm. The grapple struck, and held. Nightflyer angled his body as his fall turned into a swinging arc. He needed to re-enter the building as high up as he could: his team was outnumbered and out-powered, and he daren't waste time. He would strike a window feet first, but at this velocity it would still hurt ...

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Bruce Kirby dodged another punch from Neutron. He was handy with his fists, a regular at the boxing gym, but it took all his skill to evade the big man's attacks and he couldn't even think about making a counter-attack. On a good day, Bruce could bench press half a ton. Neutron wouldn't break a sweat lifting ten times that amount. One solid punch, and Bruce would be dead.

What the hell am I doing? He thought. *I'm no hero!*

They were fighting—if you could actually call something so one-sided a 'fight'—near the bank of elevators. Unexpectedly, Bruce saw one elevator door open and a bruised and bloodied Nightflyer swung off the elevator cable to land behind Neutron. In one hand he held another cable of some sort ...

Nightflyer jammed the high-voltage power cable he had liberated three storeys down into the small of Neutron's back. Somewhere in the building fuses blew, but not before the villain received an enormous electrical jolt. He convulsed and swayed on his feet.

Bruce's uppercut struck the stunned Neutron's jaw at the same time as Nightflyer's spinning kick to the back of his head. The big man went down like the proverbial ton of bricks.

'Not bad ... kid,' wheezed Nightflyer.

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Scorpio had manoeuvred his freewheeling fight with the Dragon to exactly where he wanted it. Suddenly darting aside, he rolled to the floor and came to his knees carrying one of the dropped sub-machine guns. Taking careful aim at the Dragon, he opened fire.

Bullets splashed on the Dragon's personal force field. One had no effect. The second caused it to flicker. The third caused it to fail. With exact precision, Scorpio ceased fire. Not a single bullet had actually harmed the Dragon.

The Dragon looked uncertain for a moment. Then he took up a new fighting stance.

'I don't need it. I'm still better than you.'

Scorpio shrugged. 'But I know something you don't.'

'What?'

A bolt of electricity struck the Dragon, jolting him into unconsciousness.

'Electron has recovered his energy.'

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Hellfire saw his teammates neutralised and cursed roundly in his native German. Avatar's astral body had been stunned by repeated magical flame blasts and was now helplessly wrapped in bands of blazing energy. Hellfire needed only a few more seconds to fully bind the demon and gain access to ... but he saw that he didn't have seconds. Abandoning his plan, he opened a portal and simply vanished.

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'Avatar?' Scorpio called.

'Here,' said Avatar weakly, making himself visible. He tried to muster the necessary willpower to counter-spell the bands holding him.

'What went wrong?'

'Long ... story. Get the ... ghost ... girl.'

Scorpio, Electron and Nightflyer looked around in vain. Even Nightflyer's intuition gave him no clues.

'What ghost girl?' Electron asked.

'Oh, chew!' said Avatar, using the versatile word he had picked up in the 24th century, before letting unconsciousness overcome him.

Hidden from normal perceptions, Astra watched the scene. She knew she would be in trouble with Hellfire, and he was a man who terrified her. But Avatar was a powerful magic user. So perhaps, just perhaps ...

I must ask Wang, she thought as she slipped silently away.

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Several of the guests were suffering from shock and minor injuries. Scorpio assessed the scene and immediately took charge, ordering those who seemed in the best shape to assist others to the elevators.

Electron activated his communicator. 'Computer, call emergency services and tell them we're evacuating people to the lobby.'

'Confirmed.'

'Alert DICE too.'

'Confirmed.'

Avatar—meaning his physical body—flew in through the shattered window. 'There are already police down below,' he said. Then, in answer to Electron's puzzled look, he explained, 'When I blacked out, the astral spell dissipated. I snapped back to my own body, and teleported back down.'

He bent down and carefully unbuckled the metallic belt from the Dragon's waist, fastening it around his own. 'This is the force field generator, right?' he asked.

'Yes, I think so,' said Electron hesitantly. 'And I don't think you're allowed to steal evidence.'

Avatar merely shrugged. 'If I have to fight astrally again, this will keep my body safe.'

Electron had to admit the demon was making sense, even if he personally felt it was a bad idea to take the belt.

Scorpio had found Bruce Kirby in the crowd. He had met him before in his civilian identity as James Lang, but of course Bruce didn't recognise him with the face-concealing helmet.

'You did well, son,' he said.

Bruce looked embarrassed. 'It's just what anybody would have done.'

'Not anybody. But—'

Before Scorpio could say any more, Penelope Lane accosted him.

'Penny Lane, Los Angeles Globe. Can I have a statement, Scorpio?'

'Ah, Miss Lane, we don't give statements.'

‘You should. Your public perception is terrible. Half the country thinks you’re terrorists. But after what you’ve just done here ... this is your chance to set the record straight.’

Electron moved over to them. ‘You’re absolutely right, Ms. Lane, but we need get these people to safety.’ He shepherded the reporter to an elevator.

‘Electron—it’s Electron, right? As soon as you’re in the lobby you’re going to be mobbed by reporters. You’ll be giving statements whether you want to or not.’

‘I’m not sure that’s a good idea ...’

‘Nonsense. You’re heroes today. If you’re going to meet the press, you’ll never have a better opportunity. Look, I’m not asking for you to unmask or anything. Just ... let people know why you’re here and what you stand for ... Oh, stop looking so panicked. You people are hopeless. Come down in the elevator with me—all four of you—I’ll coach you on the way down. Trust me, you’ll knock ’em dead!’

‘I hope not!’ said Avatar, alarmed.

‘We do need better public relations,’ said Nightflyer, who had been shot at by police more times than he could count while trying to stop crimes around the city.

‘Why are you helping us? What’s your angle?’ asked Scorpio.

‘Why, you’ll owe me an exclusive, of course.’

Scorpio looked round at the team. Everybody nodded or shrugged. Which was as close to a decision as Strikeforce generally got. He turned back to the reporter and nodded.

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- ❖ Lobby, Haley Hotel
- ❖ Fifteen minutes later

When the elevator door opened and four members of Strikeforce stepped out, what seemed like a thousand cameras clicked. A mob of reporters shouted questions. Penny Lane, seasoned professional that she was, took a step forward and held up a hand for attention. In the voice she usually reserved for bellowing questions after retreating politicians, she firmly announced, ‘Ladies and gentlemen of the press, the Los Angeles Globe would like to introduce America’s newest heroes, **Strikeforce!**’

- ❖ Nobody introduced me, of course. But that’s just typical. Brain the size of a planet and it’s just, ‘Call emergency services, Computer’. I don’t know why I bother sometimes ...

End of Part Three.